

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A community service offering apparatus for exchanging information with a plurality of user terminals connected by a network, the apparatus comprising:

virtual space information storing means for storing in advance information about a plurality of virtual spaces;

virtual space offering means for allowing a user to select any one of said virtual spaces and for offering the selected virtual space as a user-specific virtual space owned by said user regarded as a privileged user; and

charge controlling means for charging said privileged user who owns said user-specific virtual space a fee corresponding to a type of said user-specific virtual space.

2. A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said charge controlling means does not charge fees on those users other than said privileged user who simply gain access to said user-specific virtual space of said privileged user.

3. A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said charge controlling means charges said privileged user a fee in proportion to

the number of other users who may gain access simultaneously to said user-specific virtual space.

4. A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said charge controlling means charges said privileged user a fee in proportion to the amount of data constituting a real storage area allocated to said user-specific virtual space.

5. A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said charge controlling means charges said privileged user either a fee in proportion to the number of objects that may be allocated to said user-specific virtual space or a fee in accordance with types of said objects, in addition to said fee corresponding to said type of said user-specific virtual space.

6. A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising access managing means for managing access to said user-specific virtual space, wherein, if users other than said privileged user attempt to gain access to said user-specific virtual space, then said access managing means determines whether or not to permit said access based on a virtual space identification code for identifying said user-specific virtual space and on a password, both said virtual space

identification code and said password being input by the access-attempting users.

7. A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising object managing means for managing objects located where desired in said user-specific virtual space.

8. A community service offering apparatus according to claim 7, wherein said object managing means manages objects located as designated by those users other than said privileged user who gain access to said user-specific virtual space.

9. A community service offering method for exchanging information with a plurality of user terminals connected by a network, the method comprising the steps of:

allowing a user to select any one of a plurality of virtual spaces provided in advance;

offering the selected virtual space as a user-specific virtual space owned by said user regarded as a privileged user; and

charging said privileged user who owns said user-specific virtual space a fee corresponding to a type of said user-specific virtual space.

10. A community service offering method according

to claim 9, wherein fees are not charged on those users other than said privileged user who simply gain access to said user-specific virtual space of said privileged user in said charging step.

11. A community service offering method according to claim 9, wherein said privileged user is charged a fee in proportion to the number of other users who may gain access simultaneously to said user-specific virtual space in said charging step.

12. A community service offering method according to claim 9, wherein said privileged user is charged a fee in proportion to the amount of data constituting a real storage area allocated to said user-specific virtual space in said charging step.

13. A community service offering method according to claim 9, wherein said privileged user is charged either a fee in proportion to the number of objects that may be allocated to said user-specific virtual space or a fee in accordance with types of said objects, in addition to said fee corresponding to said type of said user-specific virtual space, in said charging step.

14. A community service offering method according to claim 9, further comprising the step of managing access to said user-specific virtual space, wherein, if

users other than said privileged user attempt to gain access to said user-specific virtual space, then, in said access managing step, it is determined whether or not to permit said access based on a virtual space identification code for identifying said user-specific virtual space and on a password, both said virtual space identification code and said password being input by the access-attempting users.

15. A community service offering method according to claim 9, further comprising the step of managing objects located where desired in said user-specific virtual space.

16. A community service offering method according to claim 15, wherein objects located as designated by those users other than said privileged user who gain access to said user-specific virtual space are managed in said object managing step.

17. A program storage medium which stores a program for causing a community service offering apparatus exchanging information with a plurality of user terminals connected by a network, to execute the steps of:

allowing a user to select any one of a plurality of virtual spaces provided in advance;

offering the selected virtual space as a user-specific virtual space owned by said user regarded as a privileged user; and

charging said privileged user who owns said user-specific virtual space a fee corresponding to a type of said user-specific virtual space.

18. A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein fees are not charged on those users other than said privileged user who simply gain access to said user-specific virtual space of said privileged user in said charging step.

19. A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein said privileged user is charged a fee in proportion to the number of other users who may gain access simultaneously to said user-specific virtual space in said charging step.

20. A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein said privileged user is charged a fee in proportion to the amount of data constituting a real storage area allocated to said user-specific virtual space in said charging step.

21. A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein said privileged user is charged either a fee in proportion to the number of objects that may be allocated

to said user-specific virtual space or a fee in accordance with types of said objects, in addition to said fee corresponding to said type of said user-specific virtual space, in said charging step.

22. A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein said program further comprises the step of managing access to said user-specific virtual space, wherein, if users other than said privileged user attempt to gain access to said user-specific virtual space, then, in said access managing step, it is determined whether or not to permit said access based on a virtual space identification code for identifying said user-specific virtual space and on a password, both said virtual space identification code and said password being input by the access-attempting users.

23. A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein said program further comprises the step of managing objects located where desired in said user-specific virtual space.

24. A program storage medium according to claim 23, wherein objects located as designated by those users other than said privileged user who gain access to said user-specific virtual space are managed in said object managing step.

25. A community system for allowing a community service offering apparatus to exchange information with a plurality of user terminals connected by a network,

wherein said community service offering apparatus comprises:

virtual space information storing means for storing in advance information about a plurality of virtual spaces;

virtual space offering means for allowing a user to select any one of said virtual spaces and for offering the selected virtual space as a user-specific virtual space owned by said user regarded as a privileged user; and

charge controlling means for charging said privileged user who owns said user-specific virtual space a fee corresponding to a type of said user-specific virtual space, while not charging fees on those users other than said privileged user who simply gain access to said user-specific virtual space of said privileged user; and

wherein each of said user terminals comprises displaying means for displaying said user-specific virtual space.